



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

For Release March 18, 1985

SECRETARY HODEL SEEKS MEANS OF AVERTING ECONOMIC BURDEN ON CALIFORNIA FARMERS FACING IRRIGATION WATER CUTOFF

Secretary Don Hodel said today he has sent the Department of the Interior's top lawyers to California to explore ways of averting serious economic consequences for farmers who would be affected by the cutoff of irrigation water to some 42,000 acres that drain into the Kesterson National Wildlife Refuge.

Hodel announced Friday that he had no choice but to move immediately to stop the flow of drainage into the reservoirs at Kesterson to protect migratory waterfowl. This would involve plugging the San Luis Drain that flows into the refuge, and halting the delivery of irrigation water to farms served by the drain.

"I care deeply, as I believe we all should, about the plight of those people who were proceeding on the assumption that water would be available this year, just as I care deeply that we must protect the waterfowl resources of America," Hodel said today at the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Washington, D.C.

"Our Solicitor, who is the chief lawyer for the Department of the Interior, and his top staff have flown to California," Hodel said. "They will be there this afternoon for meetings with attorneys representing a wide range of interests there."

"Our purpose is to make plain that we are determined to close Kesterson, we are determined to plug the San Luis Drain, and that we would like within that context to seek a way to continue to permit water to be put on the land for agriculture this year -- the point being that if we put water on the land now, and do not plug the drain, then we continue the problem at Kesterson, but if we can plug the drain, if we can keep that water from leaving the land and going into the drain and reaching Kesterson, we begin the elimination of that problem."

(more)

Hodel said he is concerned about the "tragic situation" facing the farmers who already have crops in the ground or have purchased seeds for the coming growing season, but now face the prospect of being without irrigation water.

"If we can prevent the toxic water from reaching the drain we may be in a position where we can find a way to alleviate to some extent that disaster," Hodel said.

Noting that federal laws had given the Secretary of the Interior the duties of both providing irrigation water to farmers in the San Joaquin Valley and of protecting the waterfowl resources of the area, Hodel said that Congress would have to establish priorities for the Department when there are conflicts such as those at Kesterson.

"In the meantime, I believe we had no choice but to take this action," Hodel said.

-DOI-